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Twice a Peabody Award winner, Barron's serious about radio news

by Sheila Mehr

Considering he "had nothing to do with the decision" to get involved in radio broadcasting, Greg Barron has certainly made waves in the field.

A writer and producer for Minnesota Public Radio, Barron was recently awarded the George Foster Peabody Award for "The Way to 8-A," a radio documentary which explores the process of involuntary mental commitment by following the personal experiences of three former patients committed against their will. Barron also received a Peabody Award in 1977 for co-producing "The Prairie Was Quiet," a sound portrait of the American prairie.

The Peabody, considered by people in the broadcasting industry as "the Pulitzer Prize of the Fifth Estate," recognizes the most distinguished and meritorious public service rendered each year by radio and television. "The Way to 8-A," one of only five radio programs to receive a 1979 Peabody

Award, was first broadcast in August, 1979. It will air again on the MPR network (KSJN 91.1 FM St. Paul-Minneapolis) at 11:30 a.m. Tuesday, June 10.

Barron, 1724 Marshall Ave., is a short, well-built man of 33, strands of silver just barely visible in his dark brown hair and beard. He sat in his small, cramped office in the KSJN studios at 400 Sibley St. last week and discussed his beginnings in a field he had never given much thought to.

Asked why he chose radio broadcasting as a career, he said that when

discussing college plans with friends, someone had mentioned radio "...and I didn't know what I was going to do so I just said, well, I'm going to get involved with that, too. It was as if I had nothing to do with the decision. I really hadn't thought about radio a lot, but it sounded interesting, so..."

Barron studied radio and television broadcasting, speech arts and journalism at Los Angeles City College and California State University in Los Angeles where

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MPR's Barron (from page 1)

he said he rarely paid attention and cut classes whenever possible. "When I left school I knew I'd have no problem (finding a job), that grades had nothing to do with things," he said.

He began writing and directing radio documentaries in 1968 for a Los Angeles radio station, and it

was then that he made a firm commitment to a future in radio. In 1972 he moved to Minnesota to work with Minnesota Public Radio.

With an earnest voice, Barron talked about his work with MPR. Because it's public radio, Barron said, it's one of the few places where a serious jour-

nalist can find satisfaction in radio, mainly because of the commitment to news and public affairs and the opportunity to tell a story in depth.

Barron has focused on the documentary and feature aspects of radio since the start. Radio has, he said, "the ability to bring some of the reality of a particular human situation to the listener, be it surrounding a particular event or the vocal quality of a person. It can bring them closer to reality."

According to Barron, very little documentary or feature programming is done on commercial radio because it's enormously expensive to research, write and produce a program that might run anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour. In the case of "The Way to 8-A," a 35-minute program, research alone took five months and the technical side of production almost another month.

Barron pointed out that he's trying to make a distinction between documentary programming and feature work. He feels using the word "documentary" brings to mind a program that is both long and boring. What Barron is trying to do is broaden the traditional documentary form, giving it a sense of drama to engage listeners in the story.

He claims it's because many broadcast executives don't have much confidence in their listeners' attention span that they are unwilling to try radio documentaries—many of which they feel are simply dull. "But that's



MPR writer/producer Greg Barron interviews Minneapolis attorney Bill Messenger, one of several attorneys working for reform in the state mental commitment process, in the Peabody award-winning documentary "The Way to 8-A". The program will be rebroadcast on KSJN 91.1FM at 11:30 p.m. Tuesday, June 10.

not to say that you can't make them terribly interesting, entertaining, engaging... that's what I'm trying to do," he said. "I want to see it popular because I love doing it. And I think it's important.

Producing a radio feature is extremely time-consuming and frustrating for Barron. How time consuming? "It's tragic!" he said laughing. "Enormously long." Working on "The Way to 8-A" he spent three to five days a week for five months researching the subject and collecting interviews. After that came "a period of gestation" while he tried to understand the material and develop a way to tell the story.

During this period, which comes with every feature he does, he said, "I hear voices inside my mind... I'm terribly distracted... I pace around a lot with my eyes closed, wandering about, muttering, scratching notes, getting excited and then ultimately (going) into a deep depression, certain that I'll never be able to make another radio documentary, that I've come to the end of the line. It takes a long time—and you have to concentrate."

Ironically, he was not interested in doing "The Way to 8-A" at first, partly because he would rather pick his own subject than have it assigned, as this one

was by John Merli, MPR's news director. But after doing research for several months, he said, "I started to find myself fascinated by it, and at that point it was my story."

Although Barron isn't working on a documentary right now, he mentioned a few ideas that he's excited about. For one, he would like to commission a Minnesota author to write a story, have the writer bring him the piece and "at that point apply radio to it and transform it into a radio presentation." He would also like to purchase a European feature program, translate and adapt it for American audiences. He hopes to find one or two such programs while he attends a meeting of some of the best radio producers in the world in Stockholm this week.

Though Barron has won numerous awards for his work in radio, he is far from content with what he's accomplished. "I've yet to get to a point where I'm completely satisfied with the final product," he said. "Part of that has to do with the fact that there's more I need to learn. I'm trying to find new ways to use this medium effectively. I'm not convinced I've done that yet."

Winning his second Peabody was something of a shock for Barron. "We're

all taught, either in school or in the industry after we're out of school, that this is one award you really want to get—and the chances are you'll never get it," he said. "It's not expected to happen once, and the second time is very difficult to believe."

Married at one time, Barron is single again. "I think I made a sacrifice of a part of my personal life to this," he said. He works normal hours now, but for several years after he came to Minnesota, he worked 12 hours a day, six days a week learning his craft. The times during a year when he works on his features, the times when he holes up in his house for several weeks at a time, are hard for anyone else to bear, and that too has taken its toll on his private life.

He does, however, find time to play a little tennis and, he said, "I like to engage in home projects... I work in the garden a bit. I just finished making an oak coffee table... things like that."

If Barron could choose how he'd like to be remembered, however, it would be "playing a significant role in making radio features popular in America... making radio features informational, engaging and entertaining."

He's already come a long way in realizing that goal.